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Taking New Aim at an Old Problem: Serials Management at the University of Oregon Libraries

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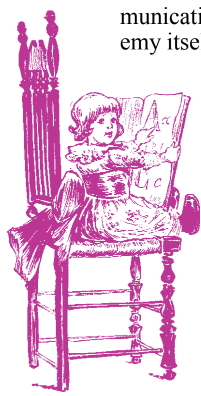
In 1988, then Acting Head of Collection Development at the **University of Oregon (OU) Libraries** wrote the following:

> "The **University of Oregon Library** has made concerted efforts on four separate occasions in the past three decades to grapple with the problem of the cost of serial subscriptions. As a result, we are currently in a situation where there are likely to be very few luxury items, very little 'fat,' left to be trimmed from the serials portion of the general library materials budget."

These four rounds of cancellations, ranging from the 1960s through early 1980s, taken together with seven more cutbacks occurring from the early 1990s through the most recent cut that is occurring this spring, indicate that the **UO Libraries** has reduced recurring expenditures every five years on average for the past fifty-six years. Through several generations of scholars, librarians and university administrators, this pattern has been repeated over and over again without fail in spite of tremendous growth in university and library budgets. For example, the total materials budget in 1980/81 was $1.2 million, approximately $3,673,720 in today's dollars. Since then, the materials budget has nearly doubled now totaling approximately $6,000,000 ($5,995,676.00) in FY 16.



The reasons and factors underlying this pattern of cyclical cutting have been studied extensively and distilled down to what has often been called a crisis in scholarly publishing. The crisis not only reflects cost increases for academic journals that have greatly exceeded the Consumer Price Index as well as augments to library budgets over time, but also refers to the system by which faculty publish their research and obtain tenure. Until recent years and the advent of open access publication options, faculty routinely signed over their copyright to publishers, often commercial for-profit entities that controlled the means of publication and dissemination, and, in turn, sold the scholarship back to university libraries. Outsourcing a process vital to academic reputation, promotion, tenure and the distribution of research for the public good might be a reasonable approach were it not for the well-known fact that the price per subscription of serials rose by 215% over the period from 1986 to 2003.

The escalation in subscription costs and the subsequent pressures on collection budgets have turned libraries into perpetual beggars at the doorstep of university administrations. Faced with the tremendous erosion of buying power, research libraries have always struggled to obtain and then maintain access to the resources needed by faculty for teaching and research. In days past, this dilemma was unfortunately perceived as a "library problem," where university responsiveness to the never ending appeals for additional funds was rewarded by watching large sums of money disappear into the maw of an insatiable black hole that could never be quenched. As the 21st century progresses, there is broader and more general recognition that this is a structural problem whose solution requires changing the very nature of how the academy goes about conducting, disseminating and rewarding the fruits of research and the creation of new knowledge.

If the real changes that need to happen in order to deal with the crisis in scholarly communication must occur at the level of the academy itself and within the scholarly disciplines in which faculty are engaged, it is reasonable to posit the question of whether the university library can do anything more than what it has always done: ask for more money, use what is provided to offset the effects of inflation for a period time and then manage periodic serial cancellation projects. In other words, is there anything else that the library can do to break the cycle of beg, spend and cut that repeats itself ad infinitum? The Collection Managers (CMs) at the **UO Libraries** believe that there is a way to mitigate, if not break, the cycle, and the group is taking steps over a two-year period to put a plan in place to reduce the library's need to request large sums of money each year to fight inflation and to lengthen the period between disruptive cancellation projects.

The Challenge

At its heart, and reduced to the simplest terms, the challenge facing the **UO Libraries** is to get its collective hands a lot more dirty in the work of serials management. When it comes to serials and databases, there are many disincentives to mess around with these resources too much:

- Scholarly journals and databases (SJ&Ds) are intended to go on indefinitely and commitments in the form of subscriptions are valued for the continuity of content that they provide in a given area of teaching and research
- Scholars come to depend on SJ&Ds and consider them to carry the lifeblood of a given discipline
- SJ&Ds rise to prominence and build reputations just like the scholars that depend on and publish in them
- SJ&Ds require extensive tracking over the course of their lifespans and present numerous challenges for library staff in terms of ordering, invoicing, delivery of content, licensing, usage statistics, etc.
- Asking faculty to participate in a process that ultimately deprives them of the SJ&Ds that they require for teaching and scholarship is distasteful, engenders ill will and runs directly counter to the values of service that libraries embody as a core ethos

For the same reason that no one goes out of the way to hit their thumb with a hammer, so too do research libraries shy away from activism in the area of serials management. Maintaining good relationships with university faculty is not only a cardinal rule for librarians but a matter of survival. Expending political capital in ways that seem to antagonize the very users upon whom good will is needed for support, advocacy and ultimately funding is not, on the face of it, a smart strategy for long-term success. At the same time, faculty are generally willing to engage in discussions about the unsustainable increases in the cost of SJ&Ds, and they often express misgivings about the state of scholarly publishing and recognize the need for systemic changes. Whenever this happens and librarians and faculty lock arms to confront the crisis, the worries about angering colleagues are subsumed by a sense of solidarity. Hence, while transparency often stirs the pot, at least in the beginning, the end result can be better and stronger relationships.

The Plan

Collection Managers are proposing to phase in a plan that will facilitate a much more active approach to managing SJ&Ds. As opposed to relying upon the boom and bust cycle where funds pooled from large cancellation projects are used to stave off inflation until the next time when more cuts are needed, CMs will begin to treat funds devoted SJ&D subscriptions as a fixed allocation. Instead of allowing the amount of money devoted to SJ&Ds to continue expanding, regardless of the amount by which the resources inflate year to year, the library will address high inflating titles on a case by case basis, recognizing the need to fund inflation from existing funds or cancel titles to cover the cost.

It is worth mentioning at this point that, in the past, covering inflation over and above predicted levels was a matter of reallocating one-time money and burning down large carryforwards. Although well-intentioned, this approach hid the real problem from our users and it enabled subject specialists to look the other way when it came to dealing with costs of inflation. What motivation did they have to address large price increases when, from

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year to year, the library seemed no worse off (save for those pesky cancellation projects every five years)? Why should they take individual responsibility for dealing with this problem if their colleagues were able to blissfully carry on? Well, things have changed at the **UO** and the budgeting and allocation process on campus no longer sanctions large carryforwards. The library has gone from having several hundred thousand dollars with which to smooth over increases to a projected carryforward of only $30,000 this fiscal year.

Now, back to the thread of addressing high inflating titles on a case-by-case basis. Collection Managers are developing a methodology to provide subject specialists with timely provision of the data that they need to make retention decisions throughout the fiscal year. As SJ&Ds come up for renewal, price increases will be noted and any SJ&Ds that are seen to be inflating over projections will be flagged for review. Subject specialists will need to decide whether to cover the amount over the projections in one of two ways:

- Cancel to cover the additional cost
- Transfer discretionary funds to cover the additional cost

The review and evaluation is expected to trigger dialogue with **UO** faculty that will provide more understanding about the costs of resources in a given discipline and make transparent the dilemma that the library faces in managing monetary resources within its budget. By taking new aim at the problem of excessive inflation at a more granular level, it is hoped that librarians and faculty can work together to confront the SJ&D crisis, moving away from the pattern of the last fifty-six years where the library hides the problem as long as possible only to "surprise" the campus with the periodic, disruptive and distasteful prospect of a time consuming cancellation project.

How Does This Work?

So, that's the idea: subject specialists will manage serials subscriptions in real time within a fixed budget. The days of focusing solely on spending out discretionary funds and paying little heed to how much the cost of serials are going up are over … probably forever. But, how do we make this work?

The **UO** implemented the first step in this process during the past fiscal year. In the past, Subject Specialists managed fund lines in the structure that I'm calling "Old Method":

1-line: Monographs

2-line: Subscriptions: serials/databases

3-line: New serials

4-line: Standing Orders

5-line: Approval plan, if applicable

Going forward, the fund line structure will use a "New Method":

1-line: Discretionary

2-line: Recurring obligations

4-line: Standing Orders

5-line: Approval plan, if applicable

You can see that the 1- and 3-lines have been combined to create a single discretionary fund line. The 2-line contains no discretionary money and is entirely devoted to subscriptions. The big change for Subject Specialists is that the distinction between a separate pot of money to purchase books and a separate pot of money to buy new serials has been dissolved. All new resources of any type must be purchased from the discretionary 1-line. If the purchase involves a recurring commitment, then money will be transferred from the 1-line to the 2-line to cover the expense.

Under this new arrangement, if a 2-line resource is cancelled, the amount that the library last paid for the resource will be credited to the 1-line, unless the cancellation is to be applied to cover the cost of inflation. This means that 1-line allocations will fluctuate from year to year instead of remaining consistent. In the past, everyone spent out the 1-lines and received an identical allocation for monograph purchases at the start of the subsequent fiscal year. Acquisitions will use an internal spreadsheet to track transfers back and forth between fund lines, and this information will be used to set the budget allocations for the next fiscal year.

To Summarize

- Subject specialists assume responsibility for managing inflationary increases
- Inflationary increases over the amount given to the library for covering general inflation will be covered through cancellation or moving 1-line funds; this will be a choice left to the Subject Specialist
- Inflation on titles locked into package deals (bundled titles from a publisher with a multi-year provision and known inflation rates) will be covered centrally as the amount should be known ahead of time

A Few Concluding Thoughts

In years, when the **UO Libraries** actually receives any augments to its collections budget, the infusion will be spread across the fund lines in the form of a percentage increase and Subject Specialists will only need to cover the difference if a publisher charges more than that percentage. For FY 17, the library was given no money to cover inflation, so any increase, no matter how big or small will need to be taken into account — a worst case scenario.

Years like the one we will be heading into have the potential to drain all the discretionary money. So, what happens then? It seems likely that we will need to take a very hard look at the large packages where we are locked into multi-year contracts. At what point does holding titles in these big deals, where we admittedly can lock in lower inflationary increases, become false economy?

Will this new level of accountability and management work to stave off disruptive cancellation projects? The end of the story has yet to be written.

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budgets is clear. As a result, the need for ongoing collections analytics to maximize the efficiency of collections expenditures and periodic large-scale reviews along the lines of that described in this article will continue. Creative budgeting and advanced collections analytics only serve to mitigate the problem while multiple communities in the scholarly communication ecosystem search for systemic solutions. Solutions that support creating a more elastic market, where price per unit and publication volume are both contained, offer long-term relief from the need for periodic reviews. While hopeful that such long-term solutions can develop, we support medium-term efforts, such as evidence-based pricing and the ***Pay It Forward Project***,[1] to create more responsive pricing models. We also intend to sustain investments in leading-edge collections analytics to position the **NCSU Libraries to** leverage emerging pricing models and prepare for future reviews.

Endnotes

1. "Findings and Other News from the Pay-It-Forward Project," *http://icis.ucdavis.edu/?page_id=713*. Last viewed January 18, 2017.

Rumors
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called **PIQL** will save the data as film. **PIQL** believes that they can store the data inside a deep mine that is frozen permafrost. This vault sits alongside the Global Seed Vault, a collection of seeds that would allow humanity to survive should food supplies be wiped out. So far the UK and US have not opted to store any national archives in the vault but they may choose to join Mexico and Brazil at a later time.

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-4357644/Doomsday-Vault-opens-precious-books-stored.html#ixzz4c-jxZNMZR

Speaking of old, ***Merriam Webster*** is the oldest dictionary publisher in America. Did you know that ***MW*** has turned itself into a social media powerhouse over the past few years? Editors star in online videos on hot button topics like the serial comma.

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